

IS DEATH IN HIGH INTESTINAL OBSTRUCTION DUE TO THE ABSORPTION OF BILE? *

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It is well known that acute intestinal obstruction occurring in the duodenum or oral portion of the jejunum is much more rapidly fatal than a similar obstruction occurring aboral to this portion of the intestine.

A rather careful study of the literature of the subject has failed to show that any definite cause has been discovered for this well known fact, everything to date being suppositional in character. So recent and so high an authority as M. Wilms, whose extensive monogram on ileus has just appeared, in discussing high intestinal obstruction says: "The time in which duodeno jejunal obstruction causes death has only in the rarest instances been prolonged. Death usually subvenes with extreme rapidity. All patients probably succumb to toxic absorption resulting from the decomposition of intestinal and stomach contents."

Starvation and lack of absorption of water, which has been thought by some to be a factor in producing the syndrome of duodeno jejunal obstruction, are hardly to be considered, particularly when one reflects that absorption of water takes place almost entirely from the colon and can therefore not be materially influenced by the position of the obstruction in the small gut. For, as Mayo says, we drink with our great gut and eat with our small. Wilms makes no mention of the possible relationship of the biliary and pancreatic fluids as a cause of death in duodeno jejunal obstruction.

Neither are these the only suggestions which have been offered as an explanation of the phenomena under discussion.

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Boszkey and Genersich offer two theories to explain the symptoms in intestinal obstruction, viz., reflex and auto intoxicational. They believe that bacteria and their toxins pass through the intestinal wall; that the slow pulse and other phenomena are caused by the interference with the vagi and splanchnics, which causes congestion of the abdominal organs, thus giving rise to anemia elsewhere, noticeably in the brain. The anuria which is characteristic of this condition is due in the opinion of these two authors to exhaustion of vaso dilators of kidneys and the drop in temperature to exhaustion of the heat centre, all due to cerebral anemia. "But," they continue, "in cases of obstruction by enteroliths, these symptoms cannot be explained on the ground of nervous phenomena. Here it must be chiefly an accumulation of feces and ptomaines and toxins due to *putrefaction of intestinal contents*."

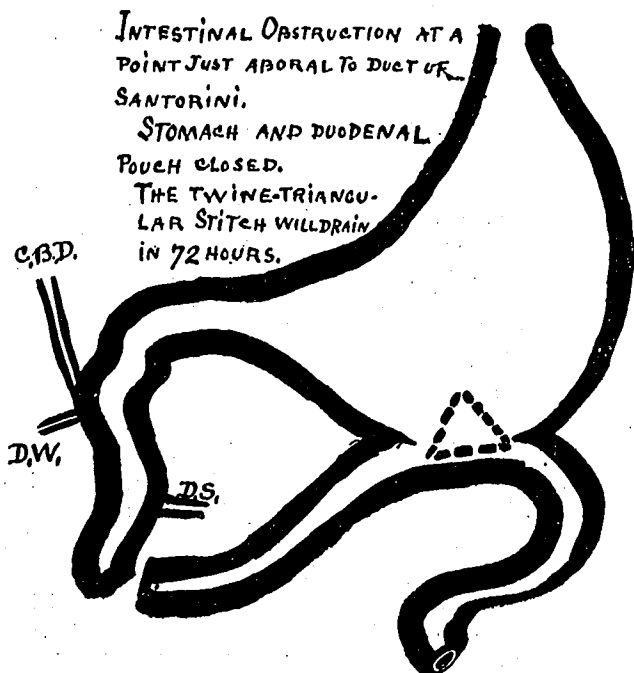
Here again in an exhaustive German monograph attention is called to the importance of putrefaction of the intestinal contents. Observations which we have made in the Laboratory show conclusively that putrefaction has nothing whatsoever to do with the cause of death in intestinal obstruction, at least when the seat of obstruction is within 35 centimeters of the pylorus.

Accidentally in the beginning, and, more recently, volitionally, we have studied this obscure but exceedingly important problem. It will be necessary in order to make our results clear, to give a short history of the manner in which the subject has been approached.

In a series of experiments conducted in the Surgical Research Laboratory of Columbia University and which were carried on to find some practical method of performing a gastroenterostomy by the so-called closed method, it was noticed that under certain constant conditions the animals operated on invariably suffered a similar train of symptoms which were always followed by a pseudo tetanic form of death. The pathological picture marked by fibrillary muscular twitchings, weakness and later rigidity is not unlike that presented after a parathyroidectomy. The conditions which

united to cause this precise form of death are shown in the accompanying outline (Fig. 1). They consisted in the performance of a gastroenterostomy by a closed method and the severance and closure of the short duodenal loop. The actual technic of effecting the establishment of the stoma is not of immediate concern here. It was made by what has been called

FIG. 1.



in previous communications the *twine triangular stitch*. It is necessary, however, to emphasize the fact that this triangular stitch, which is a simple substitute for the McGraw elastic ligature, has been introduced in all the series as a control. It is of great use for experimental purposes when it is desired to close the stomach for a constant number of hours and subse-

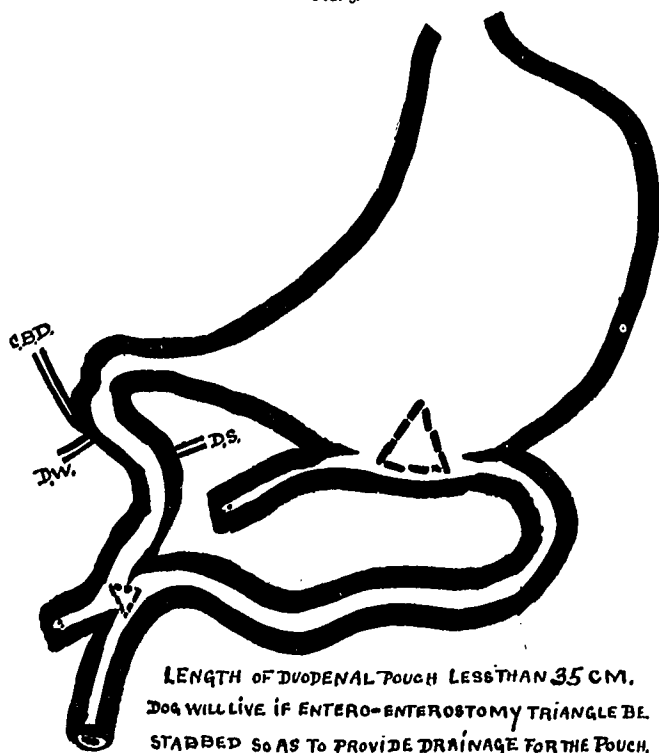
FIG. 2.



Intestinal obstruction. Photograph showing entero-anastomosis (open). Gastro-enterostomy triangular sitch (closed). Animals live if loop be drained. Note the enteritis which formed in end of intestinal pouch.

quently to have drainage re-established. The twine cuts a punched out opening at a period of from 70 to 100 hours. This varies in different subjects, but in long series a general average will be maintained. This is the first point to make clear.

FIG. 3.



In the second place, it was found that the length of the loop from the pylorus to the invagination was the essential factor in determining whether or not the animal would live. It was shown after many tests that if the distance from the infolding to the pylorus was less than 35 centimeters, it would die before

the twine triangular stitch gave drainage (70 to 100 hours). If the loop were longer, the animal would live.

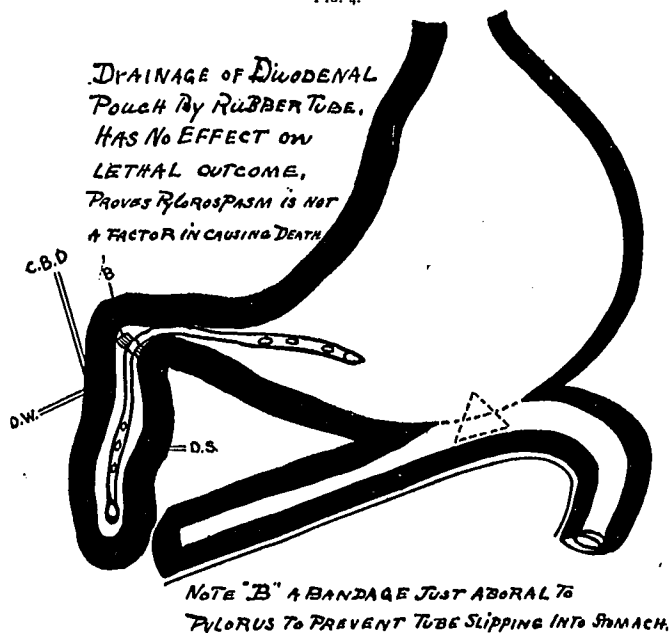
The third point is this: It was suggested by Dr. Flexner that this pseudo-tetanic death might be ascribed to decomposition of food materials in the stomach and duodenal loop. A number of experiments, however, upon fasting animals demonstrated that the presence or absence of food material in the stomach had no effect whatsoever in modifying the influence already alluded to of length of loop. Animals with stomachs well filled and those with alimentary canals thoroughly emptied showed no variation whatsoever in character or rapidity of death. The lethal line in either case was always approximately 35 centimeters from the pylorus.

There was a fourth point of importance. The question arose: Was the disturbance of innervation at the pylorus responsible for the death of the animal? A series of six dogs were operated on in the following manner. The pylorus was either sectioned or resected together with a small amount of stomach, and the ends infolded, great care being taken not to injure the bile duct. Twine triangular ligature was then inserted to create a gastroenterostomy. Without exception these animals lived until after the stoma had been established. This led to a most important conclusion. It showed that if the section and blockage of the duodenum were made oral to the bile duct, so that drainage were maintained for hepatic and pancreatic secretions, the animal would tolerate the absolute closure of the stomach without any ill effect until this viscus were drained by the establishment of the stoma 70 hours later. It is of great import to notice this, for it shows that, the nervous element owing to shock produced by section of the gut in the neighborhood of the pylorus, which has long been recognized to be a serious factor from a vital standpoint, in all operations in this neighborhood has absolutely nothing to do with this form of death which we have described as pseudo-tetanic. It suggests that the biliary or pancreatic secretions, or both, stand in some very definite relation to the lethal results observed. Pseudo-tetanic death occurring so constantly after section aboral to

these ducts and so rarely when the section was made oral to them, is indicative that some profound interruption of normal chemical processes in the intestine produces the fatal result rather than any nervous disturbance or shock.

It should be emphasized that the animals will live with a blocked loop less than 35 centimeters in length if the stoma be made an open one. Drainage of the stomach into the intestines

FIG. 4.



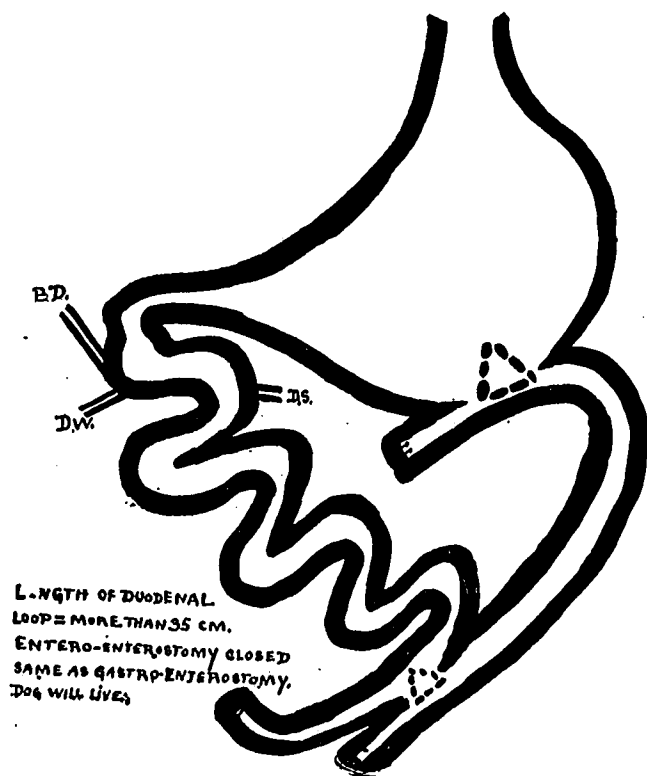
suffices to save the animal's life, no matter where the duodenum may be blocked.

It was further determined that the effect of entero-anastomosis between the jejunum just distal to the gastroenterostomy and the closed duodenal loop just aboral to the entrance of the ducts gave a similar result. Dogs operated on in this manner live. In other words, drainage of the loop is as

effectual in preventing the lethal results as is drainage of the stomach.

Moreover the fatal outcome is not the result of a closure of the loop produced by pylorospasm. The figure (4) shows how the proof of this was obtained. Rubber tubes placed so

FIG 5.

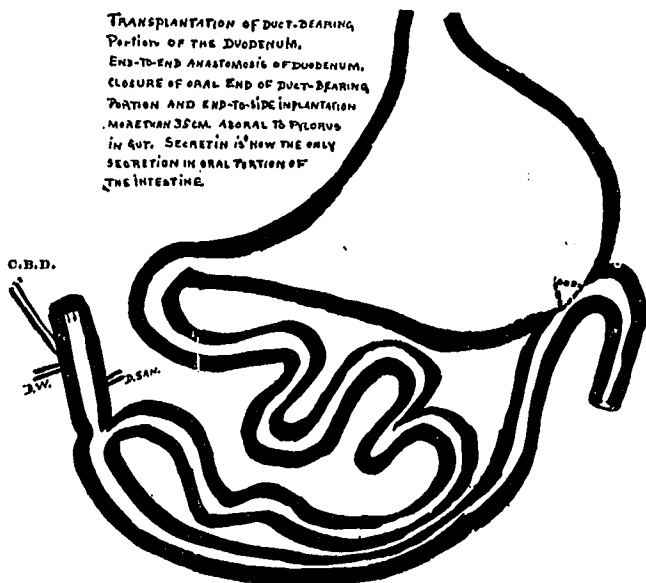


as to connect the loop with the stomach failed to be instrumental in preventing death. Drainage of the loop into the stomach is therefore shown to be without effect in preventing death.

Having eliminated nervous shock, as the source of lethal

impulse, as well as poisoning from food decomposition, obviously it became evident that the cause of death might lie in the production of poisonous substances produced by a mixture of the biliary and pancreatic secretions. It seemed possible, moreover, that this hypothesis might give us the real explanation of the fact that 35 centimeters or more of intestine in the closed duct-bearing portion sufficed to avert fatal results. For we may conceive that in this length of intestine such a quantity

FIG. 6.



of diluting material may constantly be furnished as would be adequate to render harmless the mixture alluded to. This supposition seems to be corroborated by the recent discovery of Flexner that the biliary salts, unless in colloidal suspension, act as violent poisons. He states (*Jour. Exper. Med.*, 1896, p. 174) that the conclusion may be drawn that the suspension of bile in a bland mixture of high colloidal strength protects

the pancreas from the immediate and acutely injurious action of the biliary salts."

Further, on page 167, he continues: "Bile contains two sets of constituents of highly different chemical composition crystalline principals and colloids. The biliary salts are known to act injuriously upon the cells while no direct cellucidal property is known either for the biliary coloring matter or the mucin."

None the less convincing as to the toxicity of the bile are the studies of Meltzer and Salant. They state: (Jour. Exper. Med., 1906, 8, p. 159) "We have positive and direct proof that normal bile from many rabbits possesses an exciting element capable of producing chronic convulsions in frogs." Page 165, "that contrary to the prevailing opinion, bile contains a tetanic element or an agent which causes increase of excitability of the nervous system. That stagnant bile as in the gall bladder, etc., invariably produces coma and paralysis, that the depressive and exciting elements of the bile are mutual antagonists; that the depressive element when present in a highly effective dose is by far the stronger of the two, while on the other hand the tetanic element becomes effective apparently in a dose far below that which constitutes the minimum for the depressive element. That bile salts seem to contain the tetanic element in an extremely less amount than the whole bile."

Moreover and also in support of the supposition that a true auto intoxication from biliary or pancreatic products is responsible for death in high intestinal obstruction, we quote from *Opie* (Diseases of the Pancreas). He showed by a long series of experiments that the introduction of bile into the pancreas caused either death of the animal within twenty-four hours or widespread destruction of the gland depending upon the amount of bile injected.

As a means of further study of this question, Dr. Blake suggested the possibility of transplanting the duct-bearing portion of the duodenum into the intestine at varying distances from the stomach. This is accomplished by means of section between the bile duct and the pylorus of the first portion of the

duodenum and a second section of the duodenum aboral to the entrance of the duct of Wirsung. The segment of gut thus removed is carefully sponged out and wrapped in hot cloths. The ends of the pylorus and duodenum are then united by end to end suture. More than 35 centimeters aboral to the pylorus an end to side implantation of the segment is done, the oral end beside the bile duct having been carefully invaginated. This is a difficult operation, but it can be brought to successful issue. Dogs emaciate quite rapidly after it has been done, so that the most recent operations practised have included a section of the intestine just aboral to the implantation of the duct bearing segment, and a gastroenterostomy by means of the triangular stitch between the stomach and the gut aboral to the section. This, it will be noticed by consulting the figure, produces the same results from an operative standpoint as is shown in Fig. 1, except that the loop of intestine from the bile duct to the pylorus is more than 35 centimeters in one case, while in Fig. 1, it is not more than 10 or 12 centimeters. These experiments are not as yet concluded.

A simpler method of testing the effect of the presence of the secretions would naturally be to tie the pancreatic ducts and the bile duct. This is easier from a technical standpoint, but of course it does not produce conditions in any way resembling the normal as does the transplantation technic already referred to. Nevertheless in a number of experiments, both the ducts of Santorini and of Wirsung have been tied as well as the bile duct. This series is not yet far enough advanced to enable us to make a report upon it. Some of the dogs have died and on autopsy the pancreas has been found to be exceedingly hard, while the omentum has been dotted with unmistakable areas of fat necrosis. This gross evidence of pancreatic lesion has not been observed in our cases of pseudo-tetanic death occurring after duodenal section and infolding just aboral to the ducts. It suggests therefore that the form of death in the one case may have been different from that in the other.

In another series of experiments, the bile duct alone has

been tied with two ligatures and divided between them. Here again the series is as yet too short to enable us to make any positive statements, but several dogs in which the bile ducts were cut, have lived with a short duodenal pouch and twine triangular stoma.

A method for transplanting the point of bile entrance beyond the 35 cm. line and one less difficult as well as less apt to be accompanied by adventitious pathological conditions such as fat necrosis is a simple chole cystenterostomy. This has the added advantage of separating the bile and pancreatic secretion. It is not easy to do this operation in two steps because of the formation of troublesome adhesions and done at one sitting, prolonged as it must be by gut section and infolding and by the triangular enterostomy, there is danger of death from shock or later by peritonitis from leakage. We have done two of these one-stage operations without a death by shock, but followed by fatal peritonitis on the fourth day. The third dog lived three weeks, and was killed to obtain the specimen shown in Fig. 7. It is immaterial that the animals died of peritonitis—the point of interest is that they survived beyond the time which would have been possible had the bile been passing down its normal channel.

MacCallum of Johns Hopkins who, with associates, has given us a most elaborate and exact study on ileus inclines to the belief that death is due to the absorption of bacterial toxins, which enter through the impaired gut wall. Clinically Mayo and others have confirmed this assumption by observing a lowered mortality to follow a wide resection of the dilated gut. Nevertheless it seems noteworthy, first, that total exclusions of gut segments may be made which, left in the abdominal cavity gradually grow to great size (see paper of Blake & Brown in this issue) without producing any signs of toxemia; second, that this work has been done in the relatively germ-free portion of the gut; third, that obstruction is tolerated during the cutting out of the control if placed oral to the bile duct while it always is fatal before the control cuts out, if situated aboral to it.

A black and white photograph of a large, dark, gnarled, and twisted object, possibly a piece of wood or a fossilized plant stem, set against a black background. The object has a thick, irregular texture and a complex, winding shape.

Photograph of specimen obtained from a dog in which acute duodenal obstruction was established. Cholecystenterostomy and twine triangular gastro-enterostomy and section of common duct were done at same time. Pancreatic ducts intact. Dog appears to have lived because of transplantation of the bile from duodenum into ileum. 1, Duodenal pouch. 2, Infolded aboral end. 3, Pancreas. 4, Site of stoma. 5, Cholecystenterostomy. 6, Cut end of common duct. 7, Cecum. 8, Remnants of liver. Mounted by Dr. Brown.

In conclusion it may be said that so far as our experiments go, there seems reasonable ground to believe that they demonstrate that death in duodeno-jejunal obstruction may be due to the absorption of toxic elements in the bile which are normally rendered harmless by dilution and colloidal suspension in the secretions of the small intestine. That as the length of small intestine from the bile duct to the site of obstruction decreases, so the diluting secretions decrease and the toxicity rises proportionately. That if further experimentation definitely proves that bile is directly the cause of death in certain forms of intestinal obstruction, it may be possible to lower the operative mortality. For a knowledge of the pathology of a condition is the first step toward the establishment of a successful mode of treatment.